

#228 HEITA MATSUMURA: JAPANESE PILOT

John Martini (JM): Today is December 8, 1991. This is an oral history tape with Mr. Heita Matsumura. The time is 6:20 PM. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Matsumura was a Flight Lieutenant, group leader of a flying group of torpedo bombers from the carrier *HIRYU*. At the time he was twenty-eight years of age. My name is John Martini and with me is Steve Haller. We're the interviewers on this tape. This particular tape is being created by the National Park Service in conjunction with the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial and KHET television. Thank you very much for joining us today.

The first question I would ask is when did you go into the Imperial Japanese Navy? When did you decide you wanted to become an aviator?

(Interpreter speaks, Heita Matsumura answers in Japanese.)

Interpreter (HM): Anyhow, he made up his mind to apply for the Navy when he was first or second grade of the junior high school.

JM: When you entered Etajima, was your goal to become an aviator right away?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Now, he graduated from the Naval academy in 1936. And while he was a midshipman in the Naval academy, he wanted to be a submariner. And after the graduation, we went to the -- what shall I say? -- training squadron, I mean, training crews of the training squadron and with the United States also, the country, then returned to Japan. And then, we all, you know, graduates went to the -- was sent to the training air squadron and we have service of the Air Force, Naval Air Force then. Also at that time we have the fitness test. And I don't know if we passed or not. And they asked me, if I'd apply for an aviator or something like that. I said, "Yes."

Okay, then we were sent to the, from the fleet, or something like that, you know. Then suddenly, I was called by the Air Force and, "You are going to be an aviator, and start the training," something like that. That was in 1937.

JM: Nineteen thirty-seven?

HM: Yes.

JM: He'd been flying for four years by the time Operation Hawaii took place. When did training begin specifically for Operation Hawaii?

(Japanese portion.)

JM: Did you speculate --- I know you were not told the target initially. Was there guesses, was there speculation of exactly what target you were training for?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Okay, something like this. No one told us the purpose of the training, however at the end of the August 1941, we were ordered to carry out the low altitude torpedo shooting training. They were --- the first time that we were

ordered to drop the torpedo at ten feet -- no, no, excuse me -- ten meters, that's approximately thirty feet. Ten meters then speed at 100 knots. Very low speed and low altitude, and after that, at that time, he imagined that -- but probably were their top, maybe, top they had just planned to carry out a certain kind of attack, in Manila Bay, or someplace around there, shallow water and something like that. So that however, they didn't know -- anyhow they were ordered to carry out this kind of a special training. And on the third . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

HM: . . . all types of aviators carry out -- gathered around his task -- I mean the air carrier, the squadron at the air carrier. Squadron means the two carriers. And also another, they have the two -- not two -- they all, the aviation officers were ordered to carry on board the flagship, *AKAGI*. And aviation, *AKAGI*'s aviation officer told them that we are planning to carry out the Pearl Harbor attack. Never the possibility of know yet that we were going to carry out the -- commence training of that kind of an attack. Not the first time we started.

JM: Did only officers know at that point, or did all the crew members, down to the enlisted men know?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Only the top officers and the aviation officers, and enlisted person, enlisted men were told by the commanding officer of the ship, on the training on the seventh of November, no . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Twenty-fourth of November, 1941. When all task forces, I mean attack forces ships gathered at the Hitokappu Bay, at Estorofu Island in northern Japan.

JM: (Inaudible)

HM: However, the ship around there, they were going to gather the northern presence. They didn't know where they were going to. And so getting cold, and what's happening, or something like that. Something like that.

Steven Haller: What was your personal reaction when you knew you would be attacking America in Hawaii?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Okay. After they were told on the third of November, on board the flagship, from the aviations officer, just you know, aviation officer told us that we are planning so that we would start training. However, training of the same, we had been carried out, same thing. They didn't say anything about the detailed plan of how to attack Pearl Harbor. So at that time, he told them that the United States was a great and strong country of the world. If we fight against the United States, it's quite a problem. And then also he wondered if they would carry out the total attack smoothly or if we can expect a good result of that attack. However, from the third of November until the twenty-fourth -- no, from the third of November to the twenty-fourth of

November, we didn't know anything about the details of the plan, how to do. And only the twenty-fourth of November, when we gathered at northern and Hitokappu Bay, at Estorofu Island, northern Japanese, northern Japan. We were -- the aviation officers were ordered to gather on board the flagship. That's the first and last pre-sail conference. And we heard the detail schedule how to do that. And . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Okay. Oh, oh, I see. They have to do it anyhow. Okay. He made up his mind. However, still we are, the task force -- that means the attack force left Hitokappu Bay on the twenty-second of November. However at that time, yeah, there was still hope that our diplomats could find a peaceful solution and the attack force was under the strict order to avoid the attack and return to Japan when the peace, the diplomatic agreement could be reached. However, on December the second, our Japanese ship received the code and the message that, "Climb Nitakayama, Mountain Nitaka, on the one, two, zero, eight."

That's the coded message, password that the diplomatic hope in Washington had failed and we were to execute the attack as planned on December 8, that's the Japanese time, that's December 7, Hawaii time, you see.

Okay. So he just concluded his personal matters on this day, on the day of the second of December, he concluded his personal matters and prepared, and committed himself now totally for the war.

(Japanese portion.)

HM: What he was most anxious about, only two things. That would be on the twenty-fourth of November, he was told that the depth of the water at Pearl Harbor, that would be fourteen meters, that would be at Battleship Row, fourteen meters about fifty-two or fifty-five, you know, feet. Okay. So they are going to use -- include the, you know, torpedo, but for the shallow water, the attack. Okay. However, they had trained, trained, trained and ordered or something like that, to drop the torpedo at less than twenty meters, that's sixty-six feet and speed less than . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: . . . one-sixty knots. Okay. They had trained at that speed and altitude, however he was very anxious about this if we failed to drop the torpedo, that the torpedo would strike the bottom of Pearl Harbor. That's only one thing. Another thing, okay, another thing. That's the -- when the first wave, sixteen torpedo planes from *AKAGI*, *KAGA*. They were assigned to attack the . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: . . . twenty-four torpedo planes from the aircraft carrier *AKAGI*, *KAGA*. They were assigned to attack the battleships. And . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: . . . sixteen torpedo planes from the . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: He was the commander of the sixteen planes assigned to attack the aircraft carriers. The aircraft carrier usually moored in the northwest side of Ford Island. However, as you know, we have the information from Hawaii that said that there would be no aircraft carrier in the harbor. And also the scout plane coming minutes before we arrived at Pearl Harbor. That scout plane reported that no aircraft carrier in the harbor. However, he was very anxious to make sure that no aircraft carrier was in the port. That to the (inaudible) unless they attack.

SH: Could you clarify -- had you ever trained with the torpedo, special torpedoes with the wooden fins, prior to leaving northern Japan . . .

(Japanese portion.)

JM: You were assigned to go after the aircraft carriers. Other pilots were assigned battleships and had their targets. Was the aircraft carriers --- they were the most dangerous and the most prized -- was that a certain honor, or was there a certain pride in being given such an important target?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Exactly what you said. He was aviation officer, he knows the powerfulness and the usefulness of the aircraft carrier, so he was assigned to attack at Pearl Harbor. So he had the aircraft carrier, so he had a very much proud of the -- he was very much proud of that assignment.

JM: Was he disappointed when the scout plane said no carriers? Or was there disappointment in the group, or . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Okay. At the conclusion, he had little regret, however, something like this, you know, four days before Pearl Harbor, they had special information from Tokyo saying that the American aircraft carrier left Pearl Harbor. Okay. However, still he had hope that the American air carrier will return to Pearl Harbor on the day or right before the day, or even on the morning of the attack. So they anticipated it. However, finally, well, he just had arrived on the northeast side of Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, couldn't see the aircraft carrier, and he was disappointed. However, had no time to get disappointed. They find another target, you know, battleship, you know. That's why, anyhow, after returning to the carrier, okay, after the operation, then he greatly regretted.

SH: What aircraft carrier was he going to torpedo had it been there? Does he know which carrier his target was supposed to be?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: On the twenty-fourth of November, at the Hitokappu Bay, at the pre-sail conference, the first and last conference, they didn't assign any ship -- you should attack that ship, or you should attack this -- because no information was established of all the aircraft in the port, or something. Anyhow, the

attack, your mission is to attack the battleships, your mission is the aircraft carriers. That's all, see. Okay.

So after we arrived at the Pearl Harbor and saw the targets, we had to find out what target is which. So he said that if the American aircraft carrier did exist in the Pearl Harbor, okay. If he arrived there first, okay, he would have attacked the largest and the aircraft carrier. That's what he said.

JM: I know many pilots took a special interest in a certain target. I know some of the midget submariners had a certain battleship they wanted to get the carrier. Did he have a certain one . . .

(Japanese portion.)

HM: That depended on the situation. So that he can say . . .

SH: When you approached Pearl Harbor, and you described that he did not see the carriers, I'd like to know now exactly what he did and what decisions you made and what you did when you entered the attack itself?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: Okay. As I told you before, we received the radio report from a scout plane saying that the battleships are there, no aircraft carrier, and cruisers and something like a seaplane carrier. So that report made him approach the Ford Island from the northwest side to make sure that no carrier -- they missed it. They missed it. Then he found that the seaplane carrier -- and if the seaplane carrier really large and powerful, okay, he would have the torpedo. However, nothing. So he didn't want to attack that ship. And he made up his mind to attack the battleships this time. Okay. Then the approach to the west side, east side of Ford Island, from the south end of the -- what do you call that? -- peninsula. West side of Ford Island.

JM: Is that the Waipio peninsula?

HM: Oh, Waipio peninsula, okay. He came to the Waipio peninsula. At that time, well, the Japanese dive bombers, attacked the Ford Island Air Force, air base. Okay, that sent up black smoke, rose quickly, and that restricted his sight. And he couldn't penetrate that smoke to approach the Battleship Row, so he made a sharp right turn toward the channel of the mouth of Pearl Harbor. And then he made a left turn toward the battle row. At that time, the mini Japanese torpedo planes from the *AKAGI*, *KAGA* rushed to that side of Battleship Row, and the air turbulence of the aircraft right in front of him disturbed his, you know, approach in. So he made up his mind to sort of give up with the attack and made another sharp right turn and tried again. And finally, he attacked *WEST VIRGINIA*.

SH: Okay, can you describe the scene as you made the approach to the *WEST VIRGINIA*?

HM: Using a map or something like that . . .

SH: No, what you saw in words, as you . . .

HM: Oh, you mean the battleship and they as a target?

SH: Yeah.

(Japanese portion.)

HM: I just arrived at the scene of attacking point and shooting point. You know, he heard that before you complete the -- before arrival, that this dropping point, about a half of the torpedo planes would be shot down by the enemy's fighters or enemy's anti-air firing, or something like that. However, I succeeded to come down here, so now, I saw the enemy, I mean the targets, that's the battleship. Okay, I had to concentrate my effort to hit my torpedoes I carried around the aircraft carrier. That's the (laughs) that's what he described.

SH: I understand it's fifty years later and I understand that later this evening you're going to have dinner with a man who was on the *WEST VIRGINIA* at that time. You only have about one minute left. I wonder if you could please tell us your feelings about this historic moment?

(Japanese portion.)

HM: We, each other, did our best to do our duties. And fortunately we are alive. We --- I didn't like --- I didn't try to kill the *WEST VIRGINIA*, the officers and the crew, you know. However, anyhow, that's what our mission or duty, to do that. And we're alive, fortunately, so I will shake a hand and just celebrate, celebrate our, you know, our lives and (mumbles) and we will pray for our permanent peace, that's what we think it's for. That's what I'm for.

SH: Thank you very much for joining us.

(Japanese portion.)

END OF INTERVIEW